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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the growth of the standards movement in education and asserts that the standards movement neglects large issues and constructs in a search for a simple, "quick fix" solution. Most of the standards' attention is centered around the content of the curriculum and little attention is paid to students and teachers. The standards movement is a "top down" endeavor, largely ignoring teacher training, student knowledge, and the nature of educational change. The document reviews today's standards that have been developed in the social studies, who the developers have been, and what might be expected to occur as a result of accepting or promoting such standards. Historical antecedents in social studies standards with the work of J. Franklin Bobbitt at the University of Chicago are noted. The history of standards has been a history of trying to "teacher proof" the right information with such an attempt being both insulting to teachers and doomed to failure. All of the standards are premised on the notion that teachers need direction. The paper examines teacher education and the requirements needed for content. The number of social studies teachers "produced" should be smaller in number, higher in quality, which is defined through the ability to design and demonstrate good teaching in social studies, not the ability to provide the answers to every social science or history question. Social studies is a dynamic field because it reflects the dynamism of humans on earth and that is what must be conveyed and cogitated. (EH)

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"Are Teachers Stupid? Setting and Meeting Standards in Social Studies."

by Murry Nelson

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"Are Teachers Stupid? - Setting and Meeting Standards in Social Studies"

Since the advent of Goals 2000 (National Education Goals Panel), President Bush's effort at consolidating national school reform into a neat package, an underlying stand has connected all national education endeavors, i.e., the promotion of a set of standards for each of the designated subject areas. In social studies, those were originally designated as history and geography, but as the politicians and the educational establishment began to tinker, the number of designated subject areas grew, with the subsequent proposal of the various standards becoming a cottage industry of research, development and application.

The Standards movement has gained adherence through fear, ignorance, neglect and opportunism -- not the best bases upon which to improve schools. The fear was that American schools (and, by extension, the United States) were lagging behind most developed nations in some obvious manner such that continued erosion of the American ability to "succeed" internationally was an inevitable consequence. Some scholars see the whole effort to question the use of standards as a conspiracy. (Shattuck, 1997). This rhetoric of fear was earlier popularized by the 1983 report, "A Nation at Risk" (National Commission on Excellence in Education) largely authored by Secretary of Education, Terrell Bell.

Ignorance has been rampant in the standards frenzy - ignorance of what schools actually do (including teaching), what schools can do, what teachers do, what the curriculum process entails, who controls the curriculum and who should.

Schools are only attended to, it seems, when there is a crisis, real or manufactured. Over the past thirty years, poorly financed schools have suffered benign neglect, to borrow the phraseology of Glazer and Moynihan (1963). Many schools even show this neglect physically, as Kozol describes in Savage Inequalities. The standards movement neglects large issues and constructs in a search for a simple, "quick fix" solution. Most of the standards attention is centered around the content of the curriculum, reminiscent of the concerns voiced by those at the Woods Hole Conference in 1959 that resulted in Bruner's The Process of Education (1960). This

overriding concern with the structure of the disciplines was the impetus for NSF funded projects that created "New Social Studies," yet both that movement and this modern one pay little attention to the student and to the teacher. And like the New Social Studies, the Standards movement has all the potential for subsequent failure. Both were "top down" endeavors, both largely ignored teacher training, student knowledge or the nature of educational change. Educational innovations, specifically the New Social Studies, have largely disappeared and many critic/observers have noted that such failure is inevitable in what Marker refers to as "a huge fragmented bureaucracy that has an amazing capacity to adapt to external pressures for change." (Marker, 1994, 86) His skepticism is echoed by Haas (1986), Hahn (1977) and Schmidt (1994), among many others.

Finally the opportunism of the Standards movement in social studies has led to grants for developing, testing and evaluating standards. Along with that is the need to promote state standards that are analogous to the National standards. Not only educational opportunities have thrived in this atmosphere, but politicians have found this issue most timely in order to promote quality education and parental support without significant financial commitment.

Today's Standards

Let's quickly review the standards that have been developed in social studies, by whom they were developed and what might be expected to occur as a result of accepting or promoting such standards.

A large federal subsidy went to the National Center for History in the Schools which over a two year period developed U.S. and World History Standards and "vignettes" to illustrate them. After being "trashed" by the United States Senate 99-1, the Standards were re-examined in 1996 and re-issued in revised form later that year. The case history of those standards illustrated the political agenda of the standards. Funded in 1992 by President Bush's Department of Education and the conservative director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the contract for the development of the standards went to a site favored by Bush bureaucrats because of a number of conservative historians there. The political belief was that the result would be a appropriate conservative document of traditional American history with appropriate mythology intact.

A problem arose when the three task forces, composed mostly of teachers and UCLA history faculty, tried to be academically responsible and failed to be politically conservative enough. The task force work was shaped and supported by almost all academic groups with an interest in history teaching in schools. Despite this, the Senate, as noted, condemned the work without understanding (or likely without reading) it. Gary Nash, co-director of the National History Standards Project(1996), referred to "the apparently deliberate distortions of Lynne Cheney, Rush Limbaugh, Slade Gorton and others who leaped into the ' Great History War' of 1994-95" (Nash, 1997, 160) .The unwritten political agenda that the conservative forces had set had not been enunciated. Nash rebuked his critics by noting the number of professional education organizations that examined and endorsed the standards. Did they, he chides, see all these people as being, in his words, "downright stupid"? The terminology is quite apt. Even though the revised standards are not dramatically different, the message is clear, i.e., these standards are political documents more than educational guidelines and must be treated as such.

Though the stories aren't as telling, the lesson applies to the earlier released Social Studies Standards (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994), though their development received no federal funding. In order to be part of this political process, the National Council for the Social Studies had to pay for its own admission.

The National Geography Standards (1994), supported by grants from the U.S. Department of Education, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Geographic Society ,are less controversial since the yawning gap in geographic education over the past 100 years made almost any standards seem like progress, especially to politicians who were generally mystified by geographic concepts.

The latest standards from the National Council on Economic Education issued in the Spring of 1997, are a model of capitalism, extolling the free enterprise system. They are sure to be a hit with Congress. The standards also are a capitalist model, in and of themselves. More than half the volume on standards is a description, in detail, of the National Council for Economic Education's

Economics America Materials which fit the standards perfectly. Some restraint is shown - there are no order blanks enclosed to purchase these curriculum materials.

The National Civics Standards (1994) are based on the Civitas model developed by the Center for Civic Education, which, not coincidentally, developed the Civics Standards. These Standards have aroused little controversy, possibly because of the content, possibly because of their unwieldy nature or possibly because they offer few suggestions on curriculum building. When one examines all of these Standards packages, it seems clear that the over 1000 pages of standards, vignettes and narrative will go largely unread and, if read, will be impossible to implement together. "The sheer overwhelming nature of the standards in social studies, taken together, is daunting, even to the best of curriculum makers, let alone curriculum committees made up of teachers (meeting a few hours a week) who are supposed to make some sense of the standards for a district, school or even a course." (Davis, 1997). The standards are meant, advocates say, to be guidelines, but they are put forth as mandates. Where does a school or teacher start to utilize them and how? It seems that the makers of all these standards know very little about how a school curriculum gets built, nor do they seem to care much about that.

Historical Antecedents

Before continuing, it might be useful to note the over 75 year history of attempts to set standards in social studies for schools. In 1918 J. Franklin Bobbitt, a professor of educational administration who specialized in curriculum at the University of Chicago, first published How to Make a Curriculum, a book that broke up recommended subject matter into lists of objectives, principles and assumptions, as well as some pupil activities and experiences, all designed to develop the good citizen, the definition of which is never enunciated.

Bobbitt's "standards" were part of the efficiency movement in education at that time, but never gained great credence in schools. Nevertheless, one can "excuse" Bobbitt for his presumptuousness, if it is remembered that teacher education was largely not a profound intellectual exercise at that time. Following high school, most prospective teachers attended a

Normal School with few courses or preparation in disciplinary knowledge. Bobbitt offered some often neglected guidance in the organization and direction of knowledge presentation.

Unfortunately education remains, in many ways, locked in the World War I era. In the period between the wars more experimentation flourished in school curriculum and practices, but in the immediate post World War II years concerns again surfaced for correcting "deficiencies" in knowledge through more disciplinary structure and content. Though teachers took more course work in subject areas and teacher education programs mandated such coursework, periodic reappearances of simplistic standards continued to occur. The most pronounced was in the 1960s and 1970s as instructional objectives and, later, competencies, were seen as the engine needed to drive school reform and improvement. In those cases, however, there was little federal involvement. Many states developed their own competencies for specific subject matter.

Just before standards burst forth in the early 1990s, an analogous movement; outcomes based education seemed to be strengthening. It focused on "the product" - the students and their abilities to demonstrate certain important characteristics, but this movement has been largely swallowed up by the standards juggernaut which specifies particular content at the beginning of the process, rather than at the end.

What Do We Really Want?

Standards are based on a presumption that teaching certain information assures its retention. The assumption embedded here and in all the standards is that the mandated knowledge of the standards is "the right stuff."

But, even if it were, "the right stuff" and even if children "learned" it, would it matter? And if so, to whom? First, let us note that if all students learned what we distilled in the standards as knowledge, it would be miraculous. There are few adult humans who actually know all that stuff and not knowing it has clearly not had a significant effect on the standing of the U.S. worldwide. "The fact that the United States is presently in its longest sustained period of economic growth is evidence that the alleged weak schools of the last 25 years either have had no effect on the economy, or that schools have indeed properly prepared students." (Correia, 1997)

Thus, do we really need students to do well on some test, externally devised and internationally compared? When put in that manner, the answer must be "no." School is not life. Life is not a multiple choice exam. When pressed, I would suspect most people would want students and school to be "successes." That, of course, is truly vague. Is success a job? Possibly. Is success intelligence? Maybe. Is success the ability to think? Could be. How about the desire to improve our society? I would think so, and every curricular philosophy ultimately is rooted in this latter notion. Even the disciplinarians note that knowledge is not an end in itself, but rather must be utilized and applied in order to bring knowledge potential to fruition.

Yet cognizance and acceptance of that flies in the face of the basic knowledge of standards since, almost universally, standards become ends in themselves and we prove it by developing National Standardized tests to make sure the standards have been met.

Teachers

As mentioned before, standards emphasize content, not the human quality of how information is presented or discovered and by whom. The history of standards has been a history of trying to "teacher proof" the right information and such an attempt is both insulting to teachers and doomed to fail. As Wayne Ross notes, "Standards-based reforms encourage centralized curriculum making that makes teachers and schools conduits for the delivery of pre packaged knowledge." (Ross, 1997)

All of the standards are premised on the notion that teachers need direction. They are, it seems, stupid, to borrow Gary Nash's description. Many critics of standards like Ross and Correia, for example, have noted the non involvement of teachers and teaching in the standards. It must be acknowledged that each of the sets of standards has had teachers involved in the writing or development of the standards, but this can not obscure the fact that the standards are given as directions, not as suggestions.

What is the view of the social Studies teacher in reference to these standards? It would appear that social studies teacher are in desperate need of the right information to teach. As Ross notes, this kind of approach has been called "spectator democracy", wherein the public is

essentially banned from managing its own affairs. Davis (1997) refers to this as an arrogance of centralization and examples of it continue to multiply as various states promulgate standards to parallel these national standards.

One of the best (or worst) examples is that of Virginia where the state Board of Education has produced a 23-page Virginia guide for social science teachers that emphasizes low level data memorization and regurgitation and makes no apologies for it. (Mathews, 1997) Sad to say, there are educators in many other states clearly interested in Virginia's standards, despite heavy criticism of the standards for lack of conceptual coherence, Anglocentrism and an overemphasis on political and military history. In a letter to the *Washington Post*, one critic noted that "while this fact-based curriculum may make sense to the adults who wrote it, it will be pure Jabberwocky to the children who will be subjected to it." (Angell, 1997) This comment could apply to the National Standards also.

The sad assumption of all this is that either social studies teachers do not know this information and why it's important or they do. If they do, then the standards process is pretty insulting. Essentially teachers are being told something that they know and practice. Will seeing it in national print make any difference to these teachers? How can standards help overcome the problems of outdated materials, run-down school buildings, school violence, poverty, unemployed parents and inadequate space? They can't, and the ignorance of that, combined with the insistence that standards WILL improve schools, can only lead to frustration and anger on the part of dedicated school professionals. The implication is that teachers had no standards before or the wrong standards. How can this be a compliment?

Of course, it may be that there are teachers who are not familiar with the content within the various standards. For these teachers the standards offer little if any substantive classroom aid. It is reminiscent of President Reagan's solution to unemployment, i.e., get a job!

These standards from "on high" ignore more localized generation of standards set by the community with the involvement of all those directly concerned. Standards that reflect local citizen involvement are non-existent. Teachers should know their students, their region and their kids

and, through that, determine the direction for the school's curriculum. These are standards that involve local control and an acknowledgment that teachers may know something useful.

If teachers are not stupid, then generating these standards is not only a waste of time but a clear waste of money. Do we really believe that teachers are simply "misguided" and that having them read these standards will put them on the path to success? Do we truly think that a curriculum is merely composed of the selection of content? Overwhelmed by reams of such content, the additional concerns of selecting objectives, utilizing various teaching strategies and implementing evaluation plans are simply ignored or forgotten.

Teacher Education

If teachers are so stupid that these standards are innovations, what's wrong with this picture? Why are they teaching in the first place? Might the real culprit be teacher education? Do we allow stupid people to become social studies teachers? Should we demand more of those striving to enter teacher education programs or demand more of practicing teachers? Is there any hope of "saving" the field of social studies if our teachers continue to be stupid?

Over the past few years most teacher education programs have raised admission grade point averages to minimums of 2.5 to as high as 3.0 or higher. Can we do any more to assure "non stupidity"? To "know" more data, more social science and history classes are mandated. Can we ever, however, demand enough coursework to cover all aspects of social studies knowledge? Clearly, "no". Thus this whole exercise is one of artifice, of superficial changes and underlying inertia.

Rather than starting with content, as the standards, emphasize shouldn't the issue focus on producing the best social studies teachers? How can we do that better? First, we need to decide what we want. American society has fixated on content. More social science. More history. Higher grades. Teacher education courses are meaningless is the message sent in some states like California. The logic goes something like this- content is vitally important and the more one has, the better teacher one will be. More content makes a better social studies teacher. A better social studies teacher teaches students more effectively. Thus, students learn more social science and get

better grades and test scores. This is a lovely syllogism, but there is no research to show that students learn more from either teachers who had more social science courses or those who had higher grades. Clearly teachers should have social science/history coursework, but cramming more discipline matter in will not lead, necessarily, to knowledge acquisition nor to better teaching. The best teachers know their students, know how to develop optimum learning for each of them and know how content fits together with larger issues of constructivist meanings.

Stupid teachers must mean poor teacher education programs in social studies in either admission, retention or completion requirements. Can teacher education be improved with more content? The clear and simple answer is "no". The number of social studies teachers "produced" should be smaller in number, higher in quality. That quality should be defined through the ability to design and demonstrate good teaching in social studies, not the ability to provide the answers to every social science or history question. If that is one's greatest concern - the demonstration of simple answers - then the wrong questions are being asked.

Social studies is a dynamic field because it reflects the dynamism of humans on earth. It is THAT which must be conveyed and cogitated. Progressive educators called this the human condition; Dewey referred to the "race experience." The consideration of humanity on earth cannot and should not be reduced to standards, unless I am wrong and teachers ARE stupid. In that case, our future is already past.

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